

# BAM blog

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 12, 2017

## *Silent Voices*—Composers' Notes



In *Silent Voices*, the Brooklyn Youth Chorus will sing 10 commissioned songs by composers such as Toshi Reagon, Shara Nova, Nico Muhly, and DJ Spooky, giving powerful voice to the disenfranchised. Helga Davis hosts, writers Hilton Als (a recent Pulitzer Prize winner) and Claudia Rankine (2017 Guggenheim Fellow) contribute text, and the International Contemporary Ensemble will play as well. *Silent Voices* was conceived, and is conducted, by Dianne Berkun Menaker, and directed by Kristin Marting.

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The following notes are by the composers, including some lyric excerpts:

### so quietly

*Music by Caroline Shaw*

*Text by Caroline Shaw*

"so quietly" is an unfolding and an amplification of the voices of individuals who do not feel empowered to speak up, to contribute to a conversation, to perhaps point out an injustice or offer a solution. It could be a tendency to swallow words or backtrack when voicing an idea or opinion in a meeting, or a broader discomfort with engaging politically in society. This piece begins with text that is blurred, muted, and unsure of itself, eventually transforming into something focused, bright, strong, and joyfully outspoken.



Brooklyn Youth Chorus in *Black Mountain Songs*, 2014 Next Wave Festival. Photo: Rahav Segev

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*Music by Jeff Beal*

*Text by Pauli Murray and Eleanor Roosevelt*

I'm fascinated by Eleanor Roosevelt. She was a transformational figure in politics, redefining the role of a public woman, while championing the causes of justice and civil rights her entire life. I had been seeking for a way to celebrate her voice to a new generation of Americans. Finding the story of Pauli Murray's friendship and dialogue with Eleanor gave me a way into her which I saw as relatable, and full of emotional resonance. While coming from vastly different socioeconomic backgrounds, Eleanor and Pauli did share many similarities. Both lost parents at an early age, and both were ridiculed for their appearance as young women—not fitting the expected mold of female beauty.

Few of us have ever heard of Pauli Murray. She was a lawyer, poet, activist, and champion of civil rights. Through her life-long friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt, she was able to have the attention of one of the most powerful political leaders of her time, through the pivotal decades of civil and women's rights. It is through Pauli's personal and untold story, I saw a first-hand, bittersweet account of a woman who struggled with discrimination her whole life—a discrimination based on gender, race, and her sexuality. Her poetry and prose from the recent book *The Firebrand and the First Lady* is a treasure trove of insight into these struggles. Wanting to study for a masters in law, Pauli was first rejected from the University of North Carolina on her race, and then from Harvard on her gender. She eventually earned a masters from UC Berkeley and later became the first woman to receive her doctorate in law from Yale. This fall, Yale will open its newest resident college, named in honor of Pauli (a first).

Pauli also lived as a gay woman during a time when such a lifestyle was not tolerated or remotely accepted. The text for "This Little Boy Girl" was taken from a letter she shared about her identity struggles with her Aunt Pauline. At the very end of her life, Pauli became the first black woman to ever be ordained as an Episcopal priest, another first. Perhaps the most remarkable quality of her character was Murray's resilience against remarkable odds. Her poetry and writings reveal her honest and emotional reactions to injustice, but they are coupled with a transformational sense of will, hope, and faith in a better tomorrow, a better America. Pauli's "new America" is a nation we are still striving to become. These issues of gender, sexual, and racial bias are still with us today, and Pauli's words seem to jump off of the page from her past into our present. Not simply a historical relic, they stand as a call to action to examine our ongoing hopes to build a better, more just society.

Developing this work, and hearing the voices of narration coming from the young women of Brooklyn Youth Chorus, really brought this material to life for me.

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## This Little Boy Girl

*Music by Jeff Beal*

*Text by Pauli Murray and Eleanor Roosevelt*

[Lyrics excerpted]

This little "boy-girl"  
This little "boy-girl" personality  
little boy  
little girl  
little girl  
little boy  
as you call it Aunt Pauline  
as you call it jokingly  
gets me into trouble.  
And to try to live  
by society's standards  
always causes me such inner conflict  
that at times it's almost unbearable.  
I don't know whether I'm right (or)  
whether society, (or) some medical authority is right—  
I only know...what makes me happy.

## Dear Mrs. Roosevelt

*Music by Jeff Beal*

*Text by Pauli Murray and Eleanor Roosevelt*

[Lyrics excerpted]

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt...

"I was the girl who did not stand up when you passed through the Social Hall of Camp Tera during one of your visits in the winter of 1934. I am sending you a copy of a letter which I wrote to your husband, President Roosevelt, in the hope that you will try to understand the spirit and deep perplexity in which it is written."

Dear Mr. President,  
Have you time?

"Have you time to listen to the problem of one of your millions of fellow citizens? I speak not only for myself but for 12 million other citizens..."

"I am a Negro, the most oppressed, most misunderstood and most neglected section of your population. Sometime ago I applied to the University of North Carolina for admission to their graduate school.

"As you know, no Negro has ever been admitted to the University of North Carolina. You may wonder then, why I, a Negro knowing this fact did make application?

"My grandfather, a Union Army soldier, gave his eye for the liberation of his race. As soon as the war was over, he went to North Carolina under the Freedmen's Bureau, to establish schools and educate the newly freed Negroes. From that time on, my entire family has been engaged in educational work in that state. Those of us who have degrees, and yet feel inadequacy of information and formal training, [now] find it impossible to go further and obtain our Master's Degree. It is the task of enlightened individuals to bring the torch of education to those who are not enlightened. There is a crying need for education among my own people..."

## Blind to the Illness

*Music by Shara Nova*

*Text by Shara Nova*

This music was written in the summer of 2016, in response to the many killings of blacks in America. At the time of this composition, Alton Sterling and Philando Castile were the most recent deaths that were highly publicized. My sorrow lead me to research and I came across a teacher, Jane Elliot, who conducts an experiment called the "Blue-Eyes-Brown-Eyes" exercise. After watching a classroom session with her, my eyes were further opened to my own assumptions, power I took for granted, my racism, and my biases. Other readings relevant to the music were *I, Racist* by John Metta, *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo, and *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander. Let the change begin in me.



Brooklyn Youth Chorus in *Black Mountain Songs*, 2014 Next Wave Festival. Photo: Rahav Segev

## Go Tell It

*Music by Paul D. Miller (aka DJ Spooky)*

*Text by Michelle Alexander*

Can a chorus sing data? Can people use the arts to give us a glimpse of how much potential there is in the human spirit when facts, information and education are available? My composition "Go Tell It" is a Gospel themed choral work that explores the links between the songs W.E.B. Dubois celebrated in African-American folk culture in his *Souls of Black Folk* with an additional sense of how data and information shape and mold our perceptions in a contemporary 24/7 media landscape. I asked renowned author and historian Michelle Alexander to use her book *The New Jim Crow* as a template for a libretto and the rest—hip-hop, techno, dubstep, trap etc.—the sound of the contemporary African-American experience—came into a synthesis. "Go Tell It" is a hybrid work. It explores the collision of several cultures: European engagements with polyphony and African American explorations in polyrhythm. The end result is a composition as much about data as it is about the choral experiment.

## I Can Barely Look

*Music by Mary Kouyoumdjian*

*Text by members of Brooklyn Youth Chorus edited by Mary Kouyoumdjian*

"I Can Barely Look" is an exploration of how we, particularly youth, sympathize with the Syrian refugee crisis. Members of the Brooklyn Youth Chorus were presented with a collection of media-circulated photos of Syrian refugees and were asked to respond to a series of questions about the photos. Pulling from a range of responses, their words were then used to create the libretto for this work. This piece is dedicated to my family who sought refuge in Syria during the Armenian genocide, to those who have left home for a more hopeful future, and to those—both young and old—who have the ability to help.

## Freedom is a Dream

*Music by Jeff Beal*

*Text by Pauli Murray and Eleanor Roosevelt*

Freedom is a dream  
Haunting as amber wine  
Or worlds remembered out of time.  
Not Eden's gate, but freedom  
Lures us down a trail of skulls  
Where men forever crush the dreamers—  
Never the dream.  
Freedom is a dream  
Haunting as amber wine  
Or worlds remembered out of time.

## Advice to a Young Woman

*Music by Nico Muhly*

*Text from The Lady's New-Year's Gift, attributed to George Savile, Marquis of Halifax (1633—95)*

"Advice to a Young Woman" is a piece in two sections. The first section deals with eye contact: an



obsessive, minuscule way of policing women's behavior. Careless glances, up-close observation: all of this translates into a neurotic, pointillistic, and focused series of pulses. The choir sings in near unison—aggressive, prescriptive. The piece suddenly cross-fades into a joyful and ecstatic image of a young woman dancing for pleasure. The music here is lightly swung, carefree, and never strays from a single key. Because the most carefree fun I know how to have is to sing with friends in canon, there is a two-part canon here. This piece is dedicated to the Brooklyn Youth Chorus, with whom I have worked for many years. I tried, here, to play to their strengths: astonishingly precise teamwork, combined with a joy in music-making.

## Keeping the Look Loose

*Music by Kamala Sankaram*

*Text by Claudia Rankine*

I believe in the transformative power of music. The act of listening creates real physical changes in the body. A musical rhythm can change your heartbeat. A harmonic progression can create chills. These visceral, physical responses have the potential to unlock deep-seated emotions and to open up new perspectives on the world. In "Keeping the Look Loose," I wanted to follow the beautiful contours of Claudia's writing, and to let that guide the music. For me, this piece follows the speaker's journey from a sense of discomfort in the body to a final freeing of their inner gaze. This is why I decided to score the piece for a capella voices and body percussion. The unaccompanied chorus both propels and comments on the journey, creating melody and accompaniment. The body percussion draws on a variety of musical traditions that feature the strength of the body, including bharatanatyam, flamenco, and step.

## Prophecy

*Music by Jeff Beal*

*Text by Pauli Murray and Eleanor Roosevelt*

I sing of a new American  
Separate from all others,  
Yet enlarged and diminished by all others.  
I am the child of kings and serfs, freemen and slaves,  
Having neither superiors nor inferiors,  
Progeny of all colors, all cultures, all systems, all beliefs.  
I sing of a new American



"The minute we deny any rights... to any citizen,  
we are preparing the way for the denial of those  
rights to someone else. When will we act to prevent  
human misery rather than avenge it?"

I have been enslaved, yet my spirit is unbound.

"I would like to hear the voice of the American people ring out loud and clear,  
proud and self-confident, saying: "This is what we are doing. This is what we  
believe..."

I have been cast aside, but I sparkle in the darkness.

## Building Brooklyn

*Music by Toshi Reagon*

*Text by Toshi Reagon*

This song is a part of a bigger exploration on the building of Brooklyn entitled "Working on a Building." The shifting, moving, and displacement of people. The recreating of infrastructure that could hold diverse communities, people of different races, religions, classes exchanged for an almost one-class system that dissolves long standing vibrant and diverse communities. A look at how money and technology meet to own what you need and offer it back to you at a price one may or may not be able to afford.

The chorus wanted to sing about the issues they as young people are experiencing: gentrification, criminalization of communities, systemic racism. I thought looking at how we got here and the ways over time we have settled people in and out of Brooklyn and how we create economic challenges around where people live, creating a system of constant struggle around the basic need for shelter and security would fit in. I was not surprised to learn that this tension and stress is happening across all incomes.

## Let Freedom Ring

*Music by Shara Nova*

*Text by Shara Nova*

Grieving the death of a loved one, a survivor searches for a response to violence by turning to the principles of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., naming injustice and actively participating in nonviolent resistance. Drawing further strength from thoughts of the Statue of Liberty, the survivor recalls the

inscription at her base, a message of inclusivity, an offer of refuge, and an embrace of all.

*Brooklyn Youth Chorus presents [Silent Voices on May 12 & 13 in the Howard Gilman Opera House](#).*

Posted by Susan at 10:53 AM

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